Educational Leadership

March 2006 | Volume **63** | Number **6**
Improving Professional Practice Pages 26-29

Examining the Teaching Life

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

We need to assess teaching practices and professional development activities in light of sound principles about how learning works.

March 2006

A school is in business to cause and promote learning. It should therefore model for all institutions what it means to be a learning organization. A school is not merely a place that expects students to learn; it must encourage and support *everyone's* learning.

For a school to be a model learning organization, all faculty members should be professional learners: They should engage in deep, broad study of the learning they are charged to cause. What works? What doesn't? Where is student learning most successful, and why? How can we learn from that success? Where are students struggling to learn, and why? What can we do about it? Effectively tackling these questions is what the "professional" in "professional practice" means.

How Learning Works

We are advocating for something more than the professional learning communities that DuFour and others have so eloquently described. School leaders need to create job requirements that make learning *about learning* mandatory. Moreover, we need the equivalent in schools of a Learning Bill of Rights—standards and structures that help us research and decide, as a staff, whether a given teaching practice is truly professional and consistent with our mission and state standards. These learning principles, like the Bill of Rights, should serve as criteria for safeguarding a learning-centered mission in which teachers regularly engage in peer review and self-assessment as part of their jobs.

In a true learning organization, staff members should work together to arrive at their own common principles. In departmental, team, or school meetings, faculty could first review the list of principles that follows or consult various authoritative resources to develop one of their own (see "Resources for Developing a Set of Learning Principles," p. 28). A committee composed of supervisors and teacher leaders could then hone the list into a draft for approval by the entire staff. Because teachers will hold themselves accountable for the learning principles, they must

own them at a deep level for significant reform to occur and for schools to truly become learning organizations.

To help you get started, we offer the following nine principles that we have developed to reflect an understanding about how learning works:

1. A key goal of learning is fluent and flexible transfer—successfully using one's knowledge and skill on worthy tasks in important, realistic situations.
2. Engaged and sustained learning, a prerequisite for understanding, requires that learners see the value of their work and experience a growing sense of efficacy when facing worthy challenges.
3. Success at transfer depends on understanding the big ideas that connect otherwise isolated or inert facts, skills, and experiences, enabling learners to meet and understand new challenges.
4. An understanding is a realization that the learner experiences about the power of an idea. We cannot *give* understandings; we need to engineer them so that learners see for themselves how an idea can empower them to make sense of things.
5. Learners require clear priorities and a practical knowledge of the work products involved to meet goals and understand standards of excellence.
6. Learners require regular, timely, and user-friendly feedback to understand goals, produce quality work, and meet high standards.
7. Learners attain understanding only through regular reflection, self-assessment, and self-adjustment as they apply prior learning to new situations and tasks through assessments that demand reflection and transfer.
8. The capacity to deeply understand depends on the capacity to reexamine our thinking because any insight typically requires us to refine our earlier ideas. Being willing and able to rethink requires a safe and supportive environment for questioning assumptions and habits, as well as a curriculum designed to foster rethinking.
9. Instruction is most effective when it is personalized—when we sufficiently honor learners' interests, curiosity, strengths, contributions, and prior knowledge, making learners feel that they are an important part of something larger than themselves.

Like the Bill of Rights, these principles, although clear, are necessarily pregnant with possibilities and implications that we can tease out only through continual analysis of the cases that come before us. Staff, team, departmental, and grade-level meetings should focus in large part on considering such professional matters as pedagogical questions, selection of instructional materials, and persistent achievement problems through the lens of learning principles.

The cases considered would be impersonal, a summary of individual classroom issues that raise an important question for staff to consider. For example, a team leader might invite members to bring samples of their strongest and weakest tests for a general discussion of the validity of local assessments related to standards. Or a department head might ensure that one meeting each semester is devoted to analyzing student feedback from a staff-developed survey about student engagement in various assignments and practices.

The Unexamined Teaching Life

Four characteristics distinguish professionals in any field. Professionals (1) act on the most current knowledge that defines their field; (2) are client-centered and adapt to meet the needs of the individuals whom they serve; (3) are results-oriented; and (4) uphold the standards of the profession in their own practice and through peer review.

A great weakness of our craft is that we typically do not *require* faculty members to justify their teaching methods, course designs, and assessments against a set of learning principles. Indeed, in some academic settings, even raising this point is viewed as an assault on academic freedom. As a result, many well-intentioned teachers end up in the grip of unexamined habits of teaching.

The inherent and perpetual isolation of staff in schools only makes matters worse. Without regular opportunities to consider, observe, and analyze best practice and receive helpful, nonevaluative feedback, how likely are teachers to engage in continual professional improvement? Indeed, teachers can be remarkably thin-skinned when someone questions their methods or decisions, and many of us resist seeking or receiving feedback from students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors. When students fail to learn, some teachers end up blaming the students, without an honest investigation of where student fault ends and teacher responsibility begins.

Nothing Personal, But . . .

The nine learning principles can serve as a vital touchstone and as a counterweight to bad habits that impede a school's mission. They can help define best practice and depersonalize the feedback necessary to improve teaching. In a pedagogical

disagreement, teachers and supervisors too often revert to defensive postures. “He just doesn't like my teaching style” and “I've been teaching for a long time, and I know that. . . .” are frequent laments in supervisory or collegial talk. These discussions can never come to a meaningful professional conclusion unless we refer to valid standards for learning.

Depersonalized feedback is productive because it is disinterested: “Nothing personal, but lecturing 80 percent of the time is inconsistent with the school goal of engaging learners in making meaning for themselves.” Or, “Nothing personal, but widespread use of multiple-choice departmental exams is out of sync with our mission to teach and assess for understanding and transfer.” Or, “Nothing personal, but only one-quarter of your students, when surveyed, report that they find their classwork meaningful.” Without explicit learning principles—and clear course goals linked to standards—there will be no end to tiresome debates and disingenuous posturing about practice. In other words, no matter how common specific teaching practices have been historically, they are only “professional” when they are defensible in terms of the school's mission and its adopted learning principles.

The need to vigorously and continually question what happens in the name of learning would be obvious to all educators if we weren't so comfortable with our habits, and hence so blind to their shortcomings. Some teachers think nothing of failing a student for a given project or even an entire semester because of one zero “averaged in” to the student's grade, even though such a practice has no counterpart in the wider world and strikes the very notion of fairness (not to mention the notions of validity and reliability). Some administrators don't bat an eye when faculty members fail to consider students' learning styles in scheduling classes or designing lessons. We defend many comfortable school customs by saying, “Hey, it worked for me and my kids!” or “We've always done it this way!”

In a model learning organization, such responses are the *opposite* of what we would expect and demand. Rather, we educators would continually ask the following questions: For whom is school currently not working as a place for learning? Why? How can we improve learning for all?

Examining Staff Learning

If our learning principles are valid, they should apply not only to student learning but also to professional development of staff members. Consider just two of these principles:

- Instruction is most effective when it is personalized—when we sufficiently honor learners' interests, curiosity, strengths, contributions, and prior knowledge, making learners feel they are an important part of something larger than themselves.
- A key goal of learning is fluent and flexible transfer—successfully using one's knowledge and skill on worthy tasks in important, realistic situations.

Many inservice programs for teachers neither personalize learning nor focus on the teachers' need to eventually transfer the learning to their classrooms. Much of what passes for inservice professional development is neither professional nor adequate for developing new learning by staff. In the worst cases, it is merely a day-filling smorgasbord, a tasting of interesting tidbits that teachers are free to try out or ignore.

Time again for our mantra: "Nothing personal, but many inservice experiences seem to be contrary to the learning principles. Staff members' criticisms have reflected this for years. How can we make changes, on the basis of our learning principles and staff feedback?" Indeed, if we were to agree to evaluate all professional development against the learning principles, we could quickly eradicate the most pointless aspects of so-called professional development activities—such as a mandatory one-size-fits-all "sit 'n' git" inservice day whose agenda teachers have little say in—with less hurt to and resistance from program planners than leaders might fear.

Unsound and unprofessional practices are also abetted by the failure of school leaders to provide staff with ongoing, organized opportunities to learn about learning and the effects of their teaching *as part of the job*. Practically speaking, that means providing the time and support necessary to ensure ongoing, collaborative staff research and development. True professional practice requires a continual, in-depth investigation into what is and isn't working locally, with ongoing adjustments to instruction on the basis of analysis and best practice. For example, each department or grade-level team would be expected to routinely analyze the assessments it uses each semester to ensure that they assess according to state standards.

Faculty members would analyze assessment results and devise an action plan that targets key weaknesses in student performance.

Leadership in a learning organization means leading by being a model learner and by demanding learning. The leadership team in a school or district must be seen as a group of professional learners, whether the purview is budgets, buses, or books. Not just because continual learning is desirable, but because it is *essential*: Each new school year brings extraordinary change to the institution as another large group of new students (and perhaps teachers) arrives. The job of education leaders in the 21st century is to continually demand significant new learning, clarifying which timeworn aspects of schooling advance learning and which unwittingly impede it.

Owning the Principles

If our message is to continually learn about learning, it would hardly do for us to recommend that you unthinkingly adopt our learning principles. So, do *not* accept our principles as gospel; do not demand that staff or colleagues bow down before them.

Rather, think of these principles as a rough draft for developing a set of understandings about learning that *faculty willingly sign off on* as representing their views about how people best learn. Consider the principles as a jump start for the challenging yet invigorating task at the heart of learning about learning.

Resources for Developing a Set of Learning Principles

- *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Robert J. Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. (2001). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. (Eds.). (2000). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- *Inventing Better Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Reform*. Phillip C. Schlechty. (1997). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Redesign and Reform*. American Psychological Association. (1997). Available: www.apa.org/ed/lcp.html
- "Making America Smarter." Lauren B. Resnick. (1999). *Education Week* (Century Series), *18*(40), 38–40.
- *Powerful Learning*. Ron Brandt. (1998). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Grant Wiggins is President of Authentic Education, P.O. Box 148, Hopewell, NJ 08525; grant@authenticeducation.org. **Jay McTighe** is Educational Consultant with Jay McTighe and Associates, 6581 River Run, Columbia, MD 21044; jmctigh@aol.com. They are coauthors of *Understanding by Design* (Expanded 2nd ed.) (ASCD, 2005).